Say That You Understand

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/34514284.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	Gen, M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham's Dogs, Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter
Additional Tags:	Post-Episode: s03e13 The Wrath of the Lamb, Post-Fall (Hannibal), Fluff, Fluff without Plot, Age Regression, Existential thoughts about time, Hannibal Lecter Loves Will Graham, Will Graham Loves Hannibal Lecter, Dogs, Snuggling, stuffed animals, Bedtime Stories, these two are just adorable, Hannibal Lecter is still a cannibal, Murder Husbands
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Little Hannibal
Stats:	Published: 2021-10-15 Words: 3,960 Chapters: 1/1

Say That You Understand

by air_of_the_Waterfall

Summary

Will raised an eyebrow and grinned. “Did you eat the Play Doh, Hannibal?”

Will discovers that Hannibal uses age regression to cope with stress and trauma. (This might make the most sense if you read “Solace in Being Heard” first, but it’s not essential.)

Notes

I’ve seen a few fics where Will regresses, but never Hannibal, and I think he could benefit from it too. He went through a lot in early life and had to grow up too quickly. He deserves to have fun and feel cared for. I mean, he eats people, but don’t we love him because he’s both terrifying and adorable?

The title is a lyric from "I Need Your Love" by Keane :)

Morning dawned in early February, the sky fresh and crisply cold, caressed by fluffy snowflakes and icicles dripping.

Hannibal clung to Will in bed like a sloth, and Will blinked awake with a quick inhale, careful not to disturb him with too much stretching. Will didn't fight a smile at the sight of Hannibal disheveled, his shoulder rising and falling deep and steady.

He'd once mused, "You know, Will, I used to be a very light sleeper. That's yet another thing you seem to have changed."

"Well, you don't need to be so alert anymore," Will had replied. "It's safe to let go when I'm here."

Will could no longer imagine his mornings without sleepy cuddles, exchanges of mumbled words and mutually unpleasant breath. Back in Wolf Trap, waking sweaty under a pile of dogs was a sufficient substitute for the connection he craved. Seasons used to roll by so quickly over the woods and fields: sleepy blues and clean whites humming… gold and orange grabbing at the backs of his eyelids… greens and rainbows seeming unattainable, as each morning he squirmed onto his side and looked out, mustering the courage to wake. He would then slap his alarm clock to shut it up, hoping it would only go off again the next day.

In Baltimore, under the same blushing sky and fading stars, Hannibal had woken every day at seven. He would describe the Hall of Time in his memory palace as follows: at the top of a clock tower, overlooking the land with no horizon, its walls caught flashes of silver and gold light on the faces of twenty-four more clocks, one for each time zone. Some were grandfathers, others cuckoo, hand-painted, hanging, and in the style of Dali. Above a fireplace mantel draped in flowers that never wilted, he kept Will's encephalitis clock in a frame with its arms flying backwards. They all ticked in unison and struck lovely music on the hour, but the largest of them all, the face of the tower, was something Hannibal had never been able to see.

"It is shrouded in fog when I dare to step outside at all," he had explained. "As many hours as I have devoted to studying the concept of time, it continues to elude me in its fluidity and intangibility ."

Will hummed. "I've always just tracked time by when in the year it's best to fish."

"Do you think fish have a more relaxing overall experience than humans?" Hannibal asked over wine. "Simply letting the water move as they swim, ignorant of the world above? They do not ponder the so-called 'impossible' or wonder how useful the answers may be."

Will snorted, "Yeah, but they're constantly inches from being eaten."

Hannibal flashed his fangs in a wide, dark-eyed grin.

These days, time had ceased to matter. The Lecter-Graham household was a world of its own, and in every molecule and structure there was love. Sometimes there was blood, but not their

own. Will sighed in utter bliss, combing through familiar silky hair.

Hannibal had been a cuddler for as long as they'd been physically intimate. He got fussy in his sleep if left alone, and Will couldn't bear the sight of him tossing and turning, seeking the affection that he'd long been denied. Contorting into a stoic and isolated person suit for decades had alienated Hannibal's most fragile inner workings, and now Will endeavored to nurture them. Recently, Hannibal had taken to sleeping with a pacifier to help ease some of that lingering restlessness; occupying his insatiable mouth while he slept seemed to occupy his mind as well.

"Morning, baby," Will whispered, petting through his hair and down his back. Hannibal stretched into the touch with a nuzzle, and Will laughed, gently tugging on the pacifier. "C'mon, angel, wake up."

With a furrowed brow, Hannibal eventually surrendered the damn thing and opened his eyes. His voice slurred with sleep as he mumbled, "You're becoming rather liberal with the pet names, Will."

"Seems appropriate. Sometimes I feel like I have a cat instead of a husband. A big, clingy cat."

Hannibal just closed his eyes again and butted his head into Will's shoulder. Will sighed and gathered him closer. There was still an hour until Will was meant to be at work, but as much as he loved the rescue dogs, moments like this made him consider quitting so he'd never have to leave this bed. He didn't really need a job, but this was best for both of them. They cherished one another's company after all those wasted years, but they were still thoughtful and particular men who needed their personal space. Hannibal especially seemed to value his alone time during the day, and Will could not deny him that.

As Will would discover, however, there was more to it than alone time. There was always more to it with his remarkable Hannibal.

. . .

That afternoon, business was slow at the shelter and Will got home early. When he opened the door, only two of their five dogs came bounding out to greet him, tongues lolling and eyes bright with more awareness than a dog really ought to have. Cephy the little grey pug and Georgia the border collie basked in his attention for a moment, sniffing the scents of other dogs all over him, then trotted off towards the living room with clear intent. Will furrowed his brow in curiosity and slipped off his shoes.

"Hannibal?"

One of the dogs yipped out of his sight. A flare of panic gripped Will, then, his overactive imagination conjuring images of Hannibal dead on the floor, dogs' muzzles buried in his organs.

"Hannibal, are you home?"

He speed-walked after Ceph's retreating tail, and music playing in the same direction grew close enough for him to finally hear. The unfamiliar voice seemed to be singing in Lithuanian, and it was undeniably a lullaby.

"Han-" Will froze in the living room doorway.

Hannibal was indeed on the carpet, but he was perfectly fine. Facing the door, he lay on his stomach with his feet swinging absently in the air, and a colouring book and markers absorbed all of his focus. He had lined up the markers beside him in rainbow order, and beyond that lay a small army of toys. There were stuffed animals, wooden building blocks, a plush triceratops half the size of their couch, and three American Girl dolls with a very detailed restaurant playset. The music was coming from his iPad, set on the floor with abandon.

Hannibal wore blue and grey striped onesie pajamas, his pacifier bobbed in his mouth, and his hair fell over his forehead and stuck up at the back. The dogs sat protectively around him, tails wagging. Rosamund nosed at his free hand while he coloured, and he nudged her away with a playful giggle.

Will opened his mouth, blinked, and gulped in air. He didn't know whether to melt into a puddle or cry, but he ended up whispering, "Hannibal. Sweetheart…"

Hannibal's head snapped up, and his pacifier fell onto the colouring book. Then, he was a picture of pure, blinding joy. His expression, so wide and clear, made him look about forty years younger.

"Will!" He stumbled to his feet and ran into Will's stunned arms, stooping to bury his face in Will's shoulder and sigh. "Will, you're home."

His voice was somehow younger as well: lighter, free of propriety, and his accent thickened like he hadn't had as much practice accommodating English.

Will, reeling with affection, lifted an uncertain hand to Hannibal's shoulder. "Yeah, Han, I'm home. I'm, uh, early…" He swallowed and tried again, making sure to express only gentle curiosity. "What are you doing?"

Hannibal stood up straight and answered, "I'm colouring."

"I can see that, but… why are you colouring?"

Maroon eyes sparked with mischief as he leaned closer and whispered, "Because it's fun, Will."

Will smiled back, still melting. "Okay. Uh, do you want to show me?"

That utter joy resurfaced, glittering like water in the sun. He was obviously in a different state of mind right now, but deep down, Hannibal was Hannibal, and this was a hopeful but carefully sanctioned test of Will's acceptance. He all but skipped back to the colouring book, bent to pick it up and pat Georgia's head, then hurried to Will and gave it to him with pride.

“I stayed within the lines. It isn’t finished yet. I made it for you.”

Will studied the offering like it was a treasure. The book had a medieval theme, and Hannibal had coloured in a rudimentary picture of a knight on a horse. It still looked like a child had done it, but the same care he’d given the markers themselves was exacted on the page. Hannibal as an actual child had undoubtedly been precocious, so it didn’t surprise Will to see this neat and tidy display.

He smiled and handed it back. “It’s beautiful.”

Hannibal looked like he wanted to cry, full of wonderment and more gratitude than he knew what to do with. Like a bullet, he was across the room, this time kneeling by the dolls and their little dining table, beckoning with his arm for Will to join him. Of course, Will did, and Hannibal introduced him to the dolls and the adventures they had been on that day. It involved baking contests, sea monsters, mermaids, and airplanes. Will could barely keep up, but seeing Hannibal’s brilliant mind in action this way felt like that time he’d tried LSD in college.

“... and now they are having dinner. I made it out of homemade Play Doh. The kind they have at the store smells terrible, and there’s too much salt in it.”

Will raised an eyebrow and grinned. “Did you eat the Play Doh, Hannibal?”

Hannibal looked at the carpet with an impish smile.

Will snickered, “That’s okay. Never feel guilty eating anything.”

For just a second, Hannibal glanced up and met Will’s eyes with a wider smile, then crawled over to the triceratops and pounced with less coordination than he was capable of. Throwing his arms around its giant neck, closing his eyes, and nuzzling into its deep green fuzz, he looked like a lion cub play-fighting with its siblings, curious to swat its paws at passing beetles and mice. In his haste to run around the room and tell Will about his day, his omnipresent fascination with the world was in its purest form.

When his face re-emerged, his nose wrinkled slightly as he yawned and rubbed his eyes, toes uncurling in their fluffy little socks. He settled onto his back and studied the ceiling. Will had never seen him so at peace, and Will’s own eyes teared up before he could stop it. He knee-walked over the carpet and laid down beside him, about a foot away.

“What are you looking at, Hanni?”

“I wish the winter never came,” Hannibal answered dreamily. “So we could always have the garden for cloud-watching. I love to watch the clouds for stories. Have you ever tried, Will?”

“Uh, I used to in high school. There was a forest behind one of my schools, and I’d go in there to relax at lunch.”

“Hm. What was high school like?”

“Lonely. Feels like a million years ago now.”

Hannibal didn't say anything after that, just inched his hand over to take Will's. Hannibal's hand was soft and guileless, not an ounce of skill or a newton of force to be found, and Will knew he was holding something utterly precious.

Lying on the plush carpet didn't hurt as much as one would expect, so there they stayed with their free hands on their stomachs, Hannibal's eyes creeping closed while Will watched him. Eventually, he seemed to fall asleep, and Will carefully stood and picked him up. Hannibal was quite a bit stronger than Will, but Will could still set him on the couch without waking him. He covered him in a blanket and snuck the pacifier into his mouth, then wandered into the kitchen with questions and emotions spinning in his head.

. . .

Will watched the digital oven clock change numbers, not thinking much and oddly surprised whenever a minute flicked by. From his perch on a barstool, he could see the whole room and its large windows. The sun tracked the earth like a guardian eye, and an hour passed.

Shuffling sounds gave away when Hannibal woke up, and the grace of his steps was back to normal and achingly familiar. Will listened to them move about the living room, then down the hall, back and forth a few times until Hannibal finally came closer. When he appeared, he wore a crimson button-up with charcoal pants and a waistcoat. His hair was neat, and the dark acuity had returned to his eyes. He set his hands on the doorframe as he had while greeting patients once upon a time.

"Will…"

Meeting his eyes, Will slipped off his seat and crossed the room. Hannibal tensed slightly when Will wrapped solid arms around his waist, then relaxed and nuzzled his dark curls.

"Will," he sighed.

Will kissed his heartbeat and asked, "Did you have a good day?"

"Yes, I did. And you?"

"Mm. Do you want to talk about this?"

A breath. "I can tell you anything."

Will stepped back just enough to cup Hannibal's face. "Yeah, you can."

Hannibal smiled a bit, then gently pulled away to glide across the room and pour a glass of wine. After swirling, sniffing, and sipping it, he closed his eyes to savour the first taste, then set it down and leaned forward on the counter.

"I had every intention to tell you," he said, drawing absent figure-eights on the marble with his middle finger. "We did agree upon having no secrets, but I prefer to have my emotions

under control and sorted through before I share them. I was not aware you'd be home early today."

Will perched back on the barstool and spun from side to side, just for the sake of doing something.

"Sorry," he offered. "I should have called."

"No worries," Hannibal said. "What's done is done. Are you familiar with the practice of age regression?"

Will shook his head, so Hannibal explained. It felt like they were back in therapy.

"It is possible to assume a younger state of mind when under stress, either intentionally or involuntarily. I most often do it intentionally. It's a healthy way to handle stress and trauma, and it's beneficial to entertain oneself in such a state with childish activities and play." He turned his head to look out the window at the snow, now watching the red wine swirl in his glass. "I find it… comforting in the winter when my childhood appears everywhere I look. I can embrace the positive memories and cope with the negative."

Will nodded. "That makes sense. Thank you for telling me. I trust you to tell me things when you're ready."

Hannibal met his eyes again with a fond smile and a sip. "I'll offer you thanks as well. Your experiment with the pacifier reminded me of regressing as a young man and encouraged me to try it again. I was under quite a bit of stress in France. Between my studies and the grief remaining so fresh, I took to various extracurriculars to express myself."

Will smirked. "Extracurriculars, huh?"

Hannibal nearly laughed, eyes dancing. "My aunt much preferred this particular method. She…" He paused, and his expression soured. "Murasaki looked after me when I couldn't look after myself, and she took advantage of that vulnerable state to try and change me. She used every weapon and wile at her command to prevent me from taking the path that led us here. I realize now that my apprehension about the pacifier and allowing you to care for me… it may have stemmed from bitter feelings about previous experience."

Will leaned closer to rest on his elbows, stroking a thumb over Hannibal's sensitive, elegant inner wrist. He whispered, "I'm glad she failed to change you."

"I will only ever be who and what I am. That you *see*… means the world to me, Will."

"I love you so damn much, Hannibal."

Hannibal watched intently as Will stood up and rounded the counter to cling to him. The shorter man dragged him to stoop down, allowing Hannibal to press his mouth into the warm skin of Will's neck. They both sighed.

"I love you too."

Will smirked. “I’d ask how you hid that huge-ass dinosaur from me, but I’m talking to the man who fed people to FBI agents.”

Hannibal preened with a sly smile. “Come.”

Taking Will’s hand, he pulled him to the second floor and into a spare room that Will barely ever paid attention to. He raised a brow as Hannibal opened the spacious closet and looked up at its ceiling. There, between two sleek exposed beams, was the dark outline of a trap door. Hannibal produced a long tool with a hook from seemingly nowhere, pulled it open, and a ladder unfolded from the ceiling. Then, he stepped back to allow Will access.

Sighing, Will climbed into yet another of Hannibal’s secret rooms. They would be having a discussion about that later. For now, Will’s grin widened as he took in the fully finished attic with a gabled ceiling. Soft, soothing lights turned on with a motion sensor, revealing a modest room full of toys, soft things, art supplies, the aforementioned dinosaur, and an unfinished jigsaw puzzle with pieces the size of a hand.

He couldn’t help the laugh of delight that left his lips as he looked down at his blushing husband. “This is adorable. You never fail to surprise me, Han.”

“To never be surprised is to hardly live at all.”

Will climbed back down. “So, did that castle of yours have secret rooms and passages? I snooped around, but I couldn’t find any.”

Hannibal ran a casual hand through Will’s curls and said, “I’ll tell you about it over dinner.”

. . .

As usual, dinner was spectacular, and it left a tired Hannibal lounging against Will by the fireplace. The couch felt like it would swallow them, the air warm, sweet, and glazed. The fire crackled like constant keyboard typing, and Hannibal’s eyes were half-lidded as he watched it dance. With an arm around him, Will absently rubbed his shoulder. The dogs piled on the floor around Will’s feet.

“I missed you,” Hannibal sighed.

“I have tomorrow off. We can spend all day together.”

“When I was incarcerated, I missed you every day. I know we’ve been working on that together, but sometimes the feeling still resembles a contusion.”

Will sighed. “I know. Me too.”

“When I learned of your wife and son, I found myself in tears most nights when the cameras couldn’t see, in the dark with my face to the wall. I wanted you to care for me how you allegedly cared for them.”

Eyes stinging, Will looked down and met Hannibal’s own. “What’s bringing this on, Han? I thought we were making progress.”

“I wouldn’t normally ask this of you, Will, but thinking of what I wanted back then… I realize that I may have it now, and I cannot deny myself.”

“What is it?”

“I’d like you to read to me.”

Will blinked. He’d been expecting something much more strange or shocking. “Any time,” he assured. “Babe, you can ask me for anything.”

Hannibal shifted from where he leaned on Will’s side. “I don’t mean reading poetry or novels. I’d like you to read me children’s books and… care for me when I’m in a regressed state. I often feel unmoored and forgotten when I do it alone.”

That melting feeling came over Will again, filling him up with helium, honey, and tears. He sat up and gently guided Hannibal’s chin until they faced each other, then Will smiled and fully cradled his face.

“I’d love to do that for you.”

Hannibal gasped in delight, expression soft in wonder as he leaned into the protective touch. His voice was already changing, quiet and small.

“I want to show you *The Secret Garden*,” he declared, hurrying out of the room. “Wait here.”

He disappeared with the pattering of sock feet, smiling fondly at their German shepherd puppies, Rosamund and Dante, who followed him closely. Winston Jr., Georgia, and Cephy stayed with Will, ears perked as they watched the others go.

Will chuckled to himself and leaned back to look at the ceiling, scratching Cephy’s ears as she leapt up beside him. He recalled another conversation from shortly after the fall:

“Happy birthday, dear Will.”

“Oh, uh, thanks. You really didn’t have to...”

“Nonsense. Increments of life are worth celebrating, especially one so remarkable as yours.”

“If you say so.”

Will had been flippant, but unable to keep himself from blushing at the feast and dessert his newly official partner had prepared. He’d been showered in love and gifts and kisses, for of course someone as theatrical and passionate as Hannibal had to make up for lost time. It was a cherished day.

Lying in bed that night, he had murmured, “I’m curious. What is your earliest memory?”

Will’s eyes tracked the distant, distorted images in his mind. “Mm, probably catching frogs in the bayous. My dad got me this little plastic thing from the dollar store to keep ‘em in. I would’ve been about three. Yours?”

Hannibal hadn't paused to think. He said, "The ceiling of my nursery was painted to look like the sky. I watched it while my mother held me to her breast and sang to me in Italian. She smelled of vanilla and lavender, and she often complained to my father about my teeth."

Will's mouth dropped open. "You do not remember being an infant."

"Yes, I do."

"Hannibal Lecter, you're a goddamn liar."

"I assure you, that is one of the few things I am not."

Will just smiled and shook his head. "I can't believe there was ever a time when you didn't have teeth."

Hannibal smiled back and shrugged with one graceful shoulder.

In the present, he scuttled back into the living room in pajamas - a silk paisley pattern this time - and snuggled up to Will with a pacifier in his mouth and the book in hand. It was half an inch thick with gold-edged pages, embellishments, and beautiful watercolour illustrations. The hard cover was smooth, glossy yet worn as Will took it to leaf through.

"This is a lovely book," he commented, testing the waters.

Hannibal just nudged his head into Will's shoulder, imploring him to start.

Will laughed and held him close. "Okay, okay. 'When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle, everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen.'"

As the story went on, Will recognized how Hannibal might see himself in the pages: a lonely orphan moving countries, being unwanted yet spoiled rotten, finding a new sense of purpose and longing for acceptance, discovering what it means to feel love and connection…

Oh, my sweet, depraved thing, Will thought with a sigh. *You really are just a human, aren't you?*

He realized that he'd trailed off and stopped reading aloud when Hannibal poked him in the knee with a bright-eyed, expectant look.

Will's smile was crooked this time. He smoothed Hannibal's hair back. "Sorry."

By the time the abridged book ended and Will closed it with a quiet swish, Hannibal was sound asleep, mumbling like the glowing fireplace coals. Will, exhausted, pulled a thick blanket over them both.

He drifted off with a yawning whisper of, "I've got you, sweetheart. Rest now."

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!